

LITHUANIANS VOTE STRONGLY FOR INDEPENDENCE BACKERS; OWDS ASK CHANGE

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MOSCOW, Feb. 25 — The Communist establishment suffered a double blow today as protesters across the country thronged the streets in a defiant call for a share of power while one republic, Lithuania, voted to end Communist rule.

In at least 20 cities from the Baltic Sea to the Sea of Japan, citizens braved an official scare campaign, registering their impatience and anger with President Mikhail S. Gorbachev's pace of change through quiet demonstrations.

The peaceful rallies, the first nationwide independent show of strength by the country's pro-democracy opposition, were held to promote insurgent candidates in next Sunday's elections for control of the three largest Soviet republics, Russia, the Ukraine and Byelorussia, and to demand an Eastern European-style round table with the Kremlin on a transfer of power from the Communists.

Landslide for Independence

Lithuania held its vote on Saturday, the first multiparty contest in the Soviet Union since just after the Bolshevik Revolution. As expected, the voters soundly rejected the Communists and gave the Lithuanian parliament a strong mandate for independence from the Soviet Union. [Page A10.]

Candidates backed by the Lithuanian independence movement Sajudis swept 72 of the 90 seats decided in the new 141-seat parliament. Sajudis candidates are expected to win more seats in runoff elections scheduled for March 10 in the 51 districts where no candidate received a majority of the vote.

The 72 seats are enough to guarantee a majority in the Baltic state's new parliament. The Sajudis slate was a mix of pro-secession Communists, independents and newly legalized Social Democratic, Christian Democratic and Green parties.

Only 29 of the winners were Communist Party members. Of those, only seven belonged to the loyalist group that pledged allegiance to Moscow.

The Communist Party has not given up its legal monopoly in the rest of the country, but the party regulars face

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Communist Defeat

challenges from nonparty members and Communist insurgents, many of them fighting uphill races against machine tactics and news blackouts.

Voters also went to the polls in the Moldavian republic, where the first free elections under Soviet rule were expected to benefit another front seeking autonomy from Moscow. No results were available today.

The protest rallies across the Soviet heartland may prove to be an even greater humiliation to the Communist Party than the loss of Lithuania, because the authorities used everything from warnings of bloodshed to an appeal by the Russian Orthodox Church to keep people at home.

The scare tactics surely reduced the turnout, but in Moscow at least they left many residents wondering, What is this opposition that has Mr. Gorbachev so frightened?

"Authorities: You don't frighten us; you're just frightening yourselves," was the message an elderly protester

Crowds defy a fear campaign that even used the church.

scrawled on cardboard and wore around her neck as she moved through a crowd that was predominantly mainstream and middle-aged.

Judging from photographs made from above, about 50,000 people jammed into a stretch of Moscow's broad garden ring road, although the police claimed that twice that number turned out, and organizers inflated the figure by several times.

Soviet press agencies reported crowds ranging from a few hundred in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, where the rally was banned, to tens of thousands in Minsk, the Byelorussian capital. Major cities in most regions of the Slavic vastness reported pre-election gatherings in the thousands.

'Oh, I Am So Sick of Him'

In Moscow, the attitude toward Mr. Gorbachev in the speeches and crowd remarks varied from disappointment to bitterness. Participants scorned the Soviet leader as a half-hearted reformer, as a captive of a Stalinist system and as out of touch or hungry for power.

"Oh, I am so sick of him," said Tamara N. Zvereva, a pensioner, when asked about Mr. Gorbachev's proposal to fashion himself a more powerful presidency. Wordy and arrogant was her verdict.

Then she relented a bit and added: "We have to admit it is tough for him. He took on all this himself, and he is still the only Communist leader we can trust."

The main purpose of the rally today was to tout candidates for the Russian parliament who have been endorsed by

a makeshift alliance of pro-democracy groups inside and outside of the party.

But hostility to the Communist Party was unusually open, in some of the speeches and in placards waved above the crowd. "C.P.S.U., Nuremberg awaits you," said one. "Corruption and the party are twin brothers," said another.

Sergei Kuznetsov, a dissident journalist released last month from a jail in Sverdlovsk, delivered one of the angriest speeches, denouncing Lenin as a "totalitarian" and Mr. Gorbachev as his heir.

"What can we expect from a round table between democratic forces and a criminal Government?" he asked, to loud applause.

Frightening the Public

Other candidates called on the Communist Party apparatus at all levels to step down.

The attendance here was noticeably smaller than at a similar rally outside the Kremlin walls three weeks ago, but that event was officially encouraged as a warning to hard-liners on the eve of an important gathering of the Communist leadership.

This time, although the marchers got a last-minute permit from the city, the authorities pulled out all stops to frighten the public into staying away.

Schoolteachers warned children to stay indoors, nurses at Moscow hospitals were told to brace for injuries, and in many work places employers hinted that the day would be a violent one.

Official television and newspapers publicized appeals for calm from the Communist Party, the Council of Ministers, the Parliament, the police and the artistic unions, but refused to give the demonstration's organizers a chance to explain their purpose.

Circulars distributed anonymously in Moscow, and repeated as rumors by some Communist Party officials, warned that the opposition planned to seize power by force. Saturday night's main television news program featured a senior prelate of the Russian Orthodox Church, who invited "believers and nonbelievers" alike to begin an Easter fast today.

"On fast days," the prelate, Metropolitan Pitirim, an official favorite, solemnly intoned, "we try to go outside as little as possible. We go to church or stay home in front of the icon."

This morning Moscow was reinforced by thousands of unarmed police and troops who blocked routes to the Kremlin and contributed to an early tension as the crowd gathered. The protesters and the police soon relaxed, and the day passed without a serious incident being reported anywhere.

Television tonight gave a reasonably straightforward account of the meeting, showing the impressive crowd but omitting the anti-Gorbachev speeches.

Oleg Rumyantsev, one of the rally organizers, charged that the fear campaign in recent days was organized by party apparatchiks in an attempt to diminish opposition chances in the elections and to bolster Mr. Gorbachev's campaign for new presidential powers.

"Since 1937, there has not been such an unprecedented campaign of hysteria, rumors, fear, slanders and provocations," said Gavriil K. Popov, an economist and rally organizer.